Charles Hitchcock House

5704 West Ohio Street, Chicago, Illinois

Preliminary Staff Summary of Information
Submitted to the Commission on Chicago Landmarks
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CHARLES HITCHCOCK HOUSE

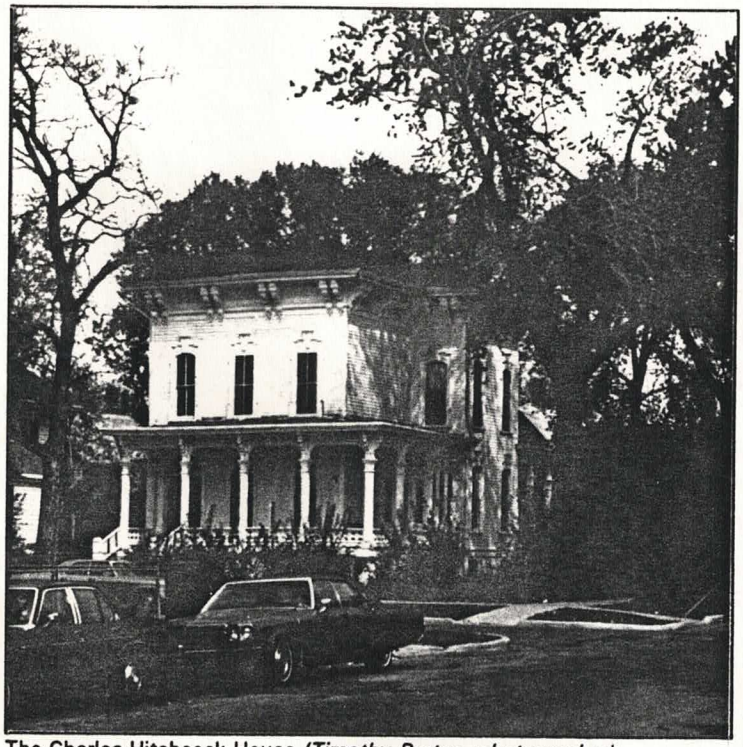
5704 West Ohio Street
Chicago, Illinois

Erected: 1871

The visual character of many outlying neighborhoods differs markedly from their inner-city counterparts due to their historical development patterns. In contrast to the masonry structures on long narrow lots that are characteristic of the central area, larger frame Victorian structures evince the bucolic qualities to which many of the nineteenth-century suburbs aspired. Although many of these former suburbs have been absorbed by the city through annexation, important examples of the architecture that reinforced the sylvan ideal still remain. Prime among them is the Italianate structure built by Charles Hitchcock in the far West Side in the former suburb of Austin.

Austin and Its Origins as a Railway Suburb

The Austin community takes its name from the man whose subdivision of and improvements to the area gave it its distinctive identity. In 1865, Henry Austin (1828-1889) purchased a 280-acre tract of land in west-central Austin, bounded by Austin Avenue, Augusta Boulevard, Central Avenue, and Lake Street. Born in upstate New York to a New England Yankee family, Austin came to Chicago in 1856 as a representative of the Gould Manufacturing Company, a hardware firm in New York state. He became a major real estate investor in both Oak Park and Austin as well as Colorado Springs, Colorado. Austin's holdings in Colorado Springs, where he maintained his "Chicago Ranch," included thirteen thousand acres. Ironically, Austin's principal residence was in Oak Park, the suburb immediately west of the community bearing his name.



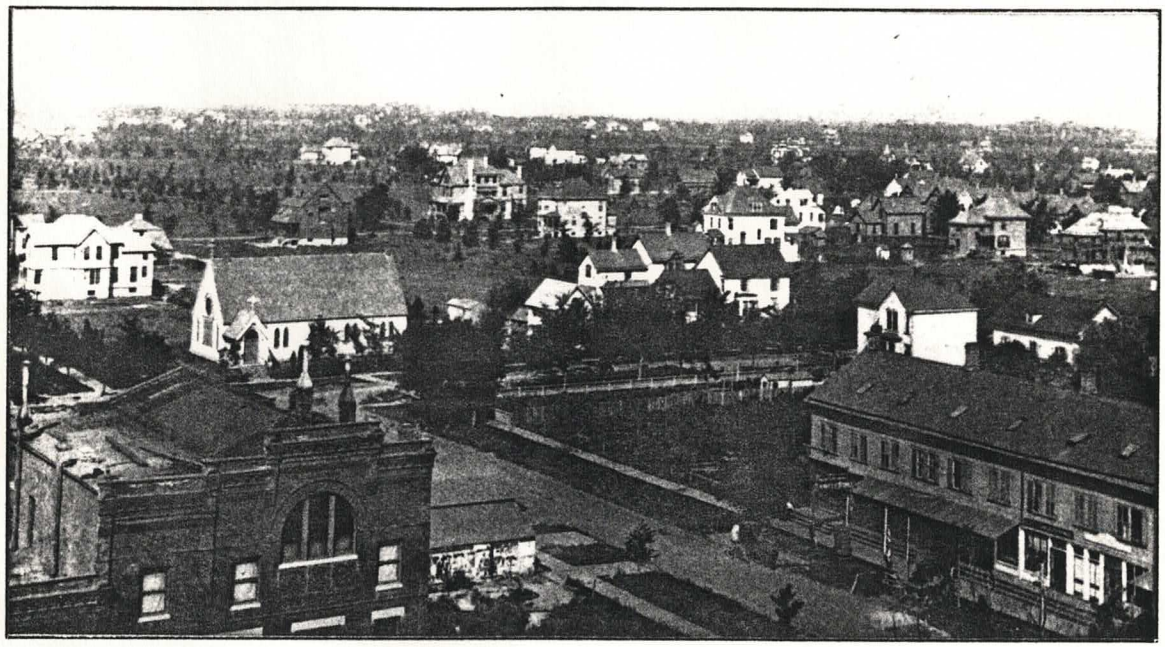
The Charles Hitchcock House *(Timothy Barton, photographer)*

The early subdivision of the Austin community was comprised of a square-mile area, bounded by Madison Street and

Austin, Chicago, and Laramie avenues. Although Henry Austin's initial holdings constituted a quarter of this tract, his property was the most desirable due to the improvements by its subdivider. In the platting of his subdivision, Austin created parkways down the middle of the more prominent streets--Midway Park and Race Avenue--which were lined with elms, evergreens, and a variety of nut-bearing trees. Austin maintained his unsubdivided property as well, planting new sod and shrubs, and enclosing the property with wood rail fences.

In 1866, Henry Austin made arrangements for two major improvements to bolster the development of the fledgling community. In what proved to be a short-lived arrangement to establish an industrial anchor, Austin persuaded the United States Brass and Clock Company of New Haven, Connecticut, to build a factory in Austin. The factory burned in 1868 and was not rebuilt. Of more lasting impact to the future character of the suburb was Austin's arrangement to link the suburb with a commuter rail line. The west line of the Galena and Chicago Union Railroad, predecessor of the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad, ran through Austin along Lake Street. Henry Austin negotiated with the railroad to make regularly scheduled stops at Central Avenue. This important link to the city promoted the future advancement of the suburb as a middle- to upper-class residential enclave.

The location of the train stop at Central Avenue greatly enhanced the value of Henry Austin's adjacent property, and as would have been expected, the earliest concentrated settlement occurred on these parcels. In order to further the affluent character he was promoting, Henry Austin sold his property with covenants assuring uniform development. Deed provisions allowed only the construction of single-family dwellings, and the minimum cost of each dwelling was set at an amount proportionate to the land cost. In addition, on some blocks a uniform setback from the street was established. More than any other development feature, the minimum house cost provision of these sales contracts assured a high caliber of architectural improvement for the community.



View of Midway Park (lower left), Race Avenue, and Ohio Street in 1888, looking northwest from the Austin Town Hall (Central Avenue and Lake Street). The Hitchcock House is located just outside of the photograph to the right. This view, indicating the pastoral character of the area, was taken when the community was in the midst of its second building boom, the period from which most of the homes in this photograph date. *(From Picturesque Austin)*

In Austin, as with many outlying areas, commuter rail access was critical in creating and maintaining a pastoral, suburban ideal that was in contradistinction to the perceptions of overcrowding and pollution within the city proper. Like so many other railroad suburbs, Austin was populated by the families of downtown businessmen and professionals, many of whom were descendants of New England Protestant families. Inevitably, they brought with them, and imparted to the community, values and social structures based on their Yankee ideals. These attitudes were reinforced by a variety of social, religious, and cultural institutions that gave the suburb a distinct identity.

By the early 1870s, more than 800 people, including many downtown business leaders and their families, were living in approximately 150 dwellings. Thirty to forty houses had been constructed south of the commuter tracks as well as another one hundred to the north. Most of these homes were described in contemporary accounts as "neat cottages," but articles also referred to a number of "quite pretentious" dwellings. The homes built throughout Austin during its first decade, and continuing through the early 1900s, reinforced the sylvan qualities of the settlement. The housing stock was marked by a pronounced individuality of expression in wood construction and featured the popular housing styles as they evolved over the last three decades of the nineteenth century. Although homeowners apparently had the means to construct in masonry, frame construction was used almost exclusively. Wood was particularly well suited for the picturesque and romantic forms of area homes and lent a distinctive texture to the community which is evident to this day.

Representative of the more ornate architecture which Henry Austin likely envisioned for this community was the residence built by Charles Hitchcock. Hitchcock bought three forty-foot-wide lots from Austin in November 1871, subject to deed provisions regarding building setback and the minimum cost of new construction. The architecture of another house surviving from the era, that of Seth Warner (1869) at 631 North Central Avenue, reinforces the period taste for Italianate forms during the early years of the settlement. Warner owned a much larger tract than Hitchcock's and built a more prepossessing house in brick, which included a distinctive cupola. The house was remodelled in the 1890s with Second Empire features, and within the last decade its owners have attempted to reproduce its initial appearance. The Hitchcock and Warner houses are the oldest houses remaining in Austin, outdating the earliest of the later Victorian dwellings by at least a decade-and-a-half.

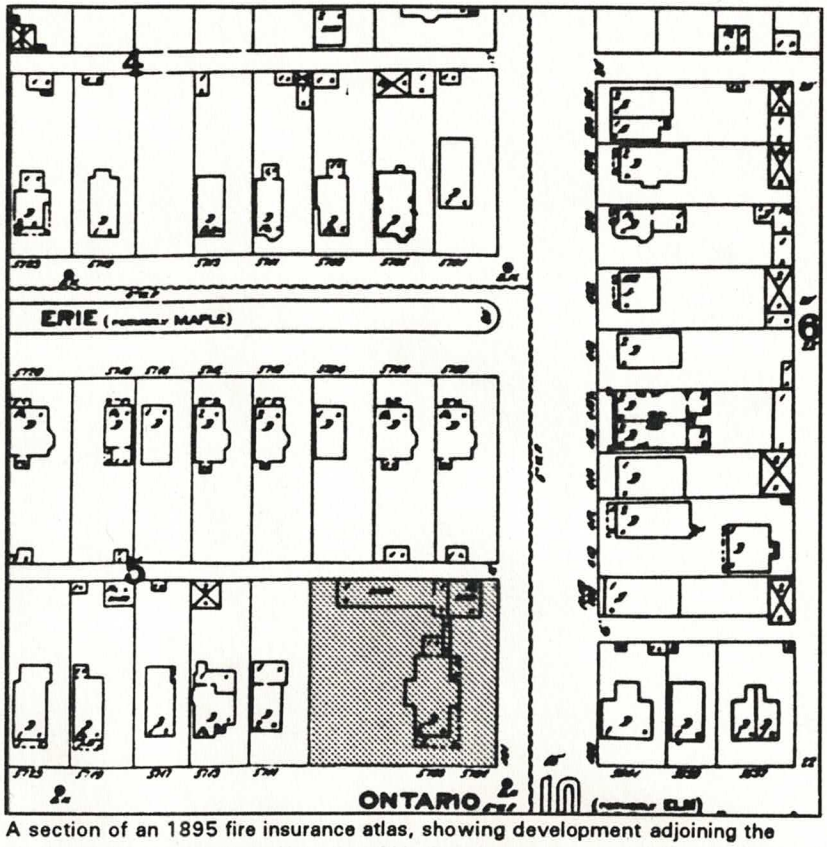
Despite the auspicious architectural origins suggested by the Hitchcock residence, this type of dwelling never proliferated in the development of Austin, due to economic instabilities brought about by the financial panic of 1873 and the ensuing depression. Large-scale development did not resume until the following decade, by which time domestic architectural styles had evolved from the formal, historic revival approach seen in the Hitchcock house to the more abstract interpretations, such as the Queen Anne and Shingle styles, which are characteristic of the late Victorian period.

The Charles Hitchcock House

In 1874, Everett Chamberlin, writing in *Chicago and Its Suburbs,* gave a brief outline of the new suburb of Austin, about which he reported, "the location possessed intrinsic merits of its own, which, when once attention had been attracted, rendered its settlement as a suburban town a matter of certainty." Of its estimated 1,000 residents, he noted that nearly all of the heads of families do business in the city. Among the prominent individuals cited in the account is Charles A. Hitchcock.

Its overall boxiness, narrow window proportions, and broad eaves make the Hitchcock House a textbook example of Italianate architecture. *(Timothy Wittman, photographer)*

As were many of his neighbors, Charles Hitchcock was a transplanted New Englander. He was born in New Haven, Connecticut in 1829, and came to Chicago in 1854 to work for the firm of Clapp & Parker, manufacturers of brass hardware for railway cars. The company underwent various ownership changes, eventually becoming incorporated in 1868 as the Union Brass Manufacturing Company. In A.T. Andreas' *History of Cook County*, published in 1884, Hitchcock is identified as the superintendent of the company and a major stockholder. In 1887, the Union Brass Manufacturing Company merged with the Adams & Westlake Manufacturing Company, the company becoming one of the major suppliers of railroad fittings in the United States. Judging from references to the Adams & Westlake Company in the property records for Hitchcock's house, he apparently had remained associated with the new company in some executive capacity. According to Andreas, Hitchcock moved to Austin in April 1871. Documents in the Cook County Recorder of Deeds office show that Hitchcock bought three lots at the northwest corner of Waller Avenue and Ohio Street from Henry Austin in November 1871. The transfer was subject to the terms of an agreement executed in July, among the terms of which were that the house cost a minimum of $2,500, a considerable sum for the period.



A section of an 1895 fire insurance atlas, showing development adjoining the Hitchcock House (shaded). Note that Ohio Street was then called Ontario Street.

Like its occupant, the architecture of the house has a pronounced New England character. Its overall boxiness, narrow window proportions, and broad eaves are textbook features of Italianate architecture, a house style popular on the East Coast from the mid-1850s through the Civil War, and whose popularity in the Midwest continued through the early 1880s. According to Virginia and Lee McAlester in *A Field Guide to American Architecture*, the Italianate and the Gothic Revival styles developed in England in reaction to classical ideals in art and architecture. The Italianate style was inspired by the informal characteristics of Italian farmhouses, and consequently exhibited forms emphatically more picturesque than the academic styles preceding it. As such, the style lent itself well to the rural and suburban developments occurring throughout the East and Midwest.

Sited on a large corner lot, the strongly vertical proportions of the wood-frame Hitchcock House, together with its elaborate and artistic detailing give the house a commanding presence. The house is two stories tall and cruciform in plan. The plan and the grammar of the style impart a severe rectilinear form; however, this boxiness is enlivened by a wealth of trim work. A broad porch with a fretsawn balustrade wraps around the south (Ohio Street) and east elevations. The porch is supported by a series of square columns with crown molding capitals, that, in turn, are surmounted by incised brackets.

The visual impact of the style relies on the wealth of embellishments to enhance its intrinsically austere form. This ornamentalism is seen best in the window and door moldings and in the cornice detailing. Typical of the style, the house has three windows across the second-floor front of its central section and is similarly divided on the first floor with the exception of the location of the front door at the westernmost opening. The openings are segmental, or somewhat flattened, arches and have elaborately milled casings around them. Each casing has an ornamental incised "keystone" which, although completely non-functional in wood construction, was inspired by such essential elements in masonry construction.

The roofline forms a striking silhouette made up of a cornice from which project pairs of immense brackets, alternating with a series of modillions, or smaller brackets. The roof itself is a flat hipped roof. Although houses of this style typically had a belvedere, or cupola, centered

on the roof, the Hitchcock House does not seem to have had this feature. No cupola is indicated on the structure in an 1895 fire insurance atlas of the area.

The house is distinguished architecturally to the present day not only for the distinctiveness of its original design but for the fact that its identifying features survive intact. It reflects a remarkable degree of conservation. The only physical change to the property was the demolition of a barn at the rear, along with an enclosed passageway between the house and the barn.

The survival of the house with such a high degree of architectural integrity is the result of its extended ownership by the first two families who occupied it. The Hitchcocks owned the house for forty years during which time the community underwent dramatic changes. In 1899, as a result of political rivalries between Austin and others member villages of Cicero Township, the township voted to allow Chicago to annex Austin, over the strong objections of the village. Annexation only hastened the filling-in of developable parcels in the area. Over a forty-year period the relationship of the house to the area changed from a free-standing house on the prairie to an anchor for the steady evolution of a city block. The Hitchcocks themselves bowed to this development pattern when, in 1908, they sold the westernmost 40 feet of their property. In 1910, the Hitchcocks sold the house to Hugh Savage, an attorney whose family lived in it until 1970. The current owners of the house have lived in it since 1976.

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Additional research material used in the preparation of this report is on file at the office of the Commission on Chicago Landmarks.

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The Commission on Chicago Landmarks was established in 1968 by city ordinance, and was given the responsibility of recommending to the City Council that specific landmarks be preserved and protected by law. The ordinance states that the Commission, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, can recommend any area, building, structure, work of art, or other object that has sufficient historical, community, or aesthetic value. Once the City Council acts on the Commission's recommendation and designates a Chicago Landmark, the ordinance provides for the preservation, protection, enhancement, rehabilitation, and perpetuation of that landmark. The Commission assists by carefully reviewing all applications for building permits pertaining to the designated Chicago Landmarks. This insures that any proposed alteration does not detract from the qualities that caused the landmark to be designated.

The Commission makes its recommendations to the City Council only after extensive study. This preliminary summary of information has been prepared by the Commission staff and was submitted to the Commission when it initiated consideration of the historical and architectural qualities of this potential landmark.

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